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AUTHOR Sayler, Michael, Ed.  
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AVAILABLE FROM Dr. Michael Sayler, University of North Texas, P.O. Box 13857, Denton, TX 76203-6857; fax: 817-565-2089; telephone: 817-565-4699.  
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## ABSTRACT

This theme issue of a Texas journal on gifted education focuses on parents and schools working together. Major articles include: "Thinking about the September Challenge" (Donna Enersen), which discusses strategies that parents and teachers can use to work together to ensure the success of gifted students; "Advocating for Appropriate Education for Your Child" (Colleen Elam), which provides suggestions on how parents can evaluate and influence their gifted child's education; "Burning Bridges or Clearing a Path?" (Patsy Symank), in which a mother reflects on working with schools to develop talent in her son; "A Taste of Gifted and Talented for Parents" (Elma Torres), which stresses the importance of communication between school districts and parents and provides steps to planning a mini-conference on gifted education for parents; "What's a Poor Parent To Do?" (Dorothy Kennedy), which focuses on what parents should look for in evaluating their child's education program; "Texas Law and Parent Rights and Responsibilities" (Ann Wink), which summarizes provisions on parent rights in recently passed state education legislation; and "Forging EDGES: Excellence via Partnership" (Cynthia Specia Shade), which describes a partnership between a school and community that has resulted in an expanded gifted and talented elementary education program. Some articles include references. (CR)

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TEXAS ASSOCIATION FOR THE GIFTED AND TALENTED  
Member, National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC)

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## PARENTS AND SCHOOLS: WORKING TOGETHER

### THINKING ABOUT THE SEPTEMBER CHALLENGE

Donna L. Enersen, Ph.D.

It is summer! This is a great time to enjoy outdoor activities, recreation, spontaneous learning, and other things both parents and children find fascinating. All families want and need time when school concerns are not the focus of schedules and interactions. Summer affords families this time to investigate, explore and even leave projects "in progress" to enjoy over days or weeks. A more relaxed pace and less stress also makes summer the perfect time for another important activity: thinking about the September Challenge.

September is the time of year when school is our main discussion topic. Teachers' rooms buzz with talk about students, dinner tables buzz with talk about teachers, even newspapers and broadcasts are filled with stories on education. Everyone approaches the new school year with high hopes. Teachers gear up with curriculum planning, fresh ideas, and inservice training. The best ones prepare to invest themselves in the lives of the young people in their care.

Parents review guidelines for homework with their children, reestablish performance expectations, and put a positive spin on the school routine. They keep a watchful eye as each day progresses to see that their children are happy and eager to go to school.

Amid the new backpacks and lunch boxes, probably no one will wish for a good year more than the students, especially the brightest of them, who want to do well and catch the joy of learning. Gifted children look to a new grade as a chance to find a teacher who will match the work to the child, who will look at them as individuals who may have uneven development, but also a need for their talents to be targeted and celebrated. With equal fervor, they hope for acceptance from age peers and mental peers and a place to grow and flourish. Some children will hope to repair the disappointment of their last year.

How can these children's teachers and parents, who care so much, meet the September Challenge of keeping the hope of the first days of school alive and insuring success for their children?

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(See ENERSEN, pg. 6)

Mary Seay



## PRAISE AND PERFECTIONISM

My experiences with parents of gifted children lead me to believe that these parents are deeply concerned about their children's unique problems which compound and exacerbate the normal problems of a developing child. Many parental concerns center around gifted children's not being quite exactly "normal." They're sort of, well...wacky. They leave us perturbed, perplexed, and praying. But in the end, we just have to figure out how to live beside our child - who views the world very differently from us - and help her learn to live beside us.

Two special problems that we sometimes face with gifted children are the issues of perfectionism and evaluative praise. These recurrent themes appear to merit inquiry and examining each may add insight into the other.

### Avoiding Evaluative Praise

Praise is a bed-rock need. It is vital, indispensable. Everyone needs praise, but sensitive, gifted children need a special kind of praise called "descriptive praise." It differs from evaluative praise in that some very specific behavior is praised.

"This is the third time you have sat down and written a thank-you note without anyone's prompting you; that makes me want to give you a hug," is an example of descriptive praise. Others are: "Good for you, you did not spill your milk today," "I heard your polite remark to your sister, and it made me feel so good," "You spent a whole half-hour playing with the baby, thank you so much; it was a big help to me," "You have made a complicated structure with your blocks/legos. That took perseverance," or "I am impressed by the number of complex sentences you have used in your essay."

This kind of praising takes some practice, but children are pretty understanding if they know that you are trying to do the right thing.

Evaluative praise is the kind in which the praiser makes a value judgment about the praisee, "Wonderful (my judgement!)" "You're great (still my judgement!)" "Terrific!" These phrases reflect an opinion and are not based on any kind of criterion or rationale that is obvious to the child.

(see SEAY, pg. 4)

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Address correspondence concerning the Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented to TAGT, 406 East 11th Street, Suite 310, Austin, Texas, 78701-2617. Call TAGT at 512/499-8248, FAX 512/499-8264.

Address correspondence and inquiries concerning *Tempo* to Dr. Michael Saylor, TAGT Editorial Office, P. O. Box 13857, University of North Texas, Denton, TX 76203-6857. Call the editorial office at 817/565-4699, FAX 817/565-2089, or by Internet at [saylor@unt.edu](mailto:saylor@unt.edu).

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**Connie McLendon**



## STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION APPROVES NEW GIFTED AND TALENTED RULES; SAN ANTONIO ISD WINS SHOWDOWN

On May 17, the State Board of Education adopted new rules for Chapter 89, Adaptations for Special Populations, Subchapter A, Gifted/Talented Education. The board approved a modification of Section 89.1 (3) to improve clarity of meaning. The rule now reads as follows:

"[The policies must] include data and procedures designed to ensure that students from all populations in the district have access to assessment and, if identified, services for the gifted/talented program."

The State Board also approved the deletion of Section 89.4 (2), relating to Fiscal Responsibility: "Not more than 25% of state funds allocated for gifted/talented education are spent on teachers' salaries unless the teacher's sole or primary assignment is providing services that are part of the gifted/talented program."

TAGT strongly supported Section 89.4 (2) in hopes that it would encourage districts to increase funds for gifted/talented teacher training and instructional materials for gifted education programs. Texas Education Agency staff informed members of the Committee on Students that the recommendation to delete Section 89.4 (2) was because of recent changes in the state accounting system, noting that it was not possible to track expenditures in the same way as in the past.

Student Committee Chair Donna Ballard of the Woodlands expressed concern about the lack of allocated funds for gifted education. Committee member Mary Helen Berlanga of Corpus Christi questioned why districts were spending so much of the gifted/talented funds for teachers' salaries when they said they did not have enough money for other services in gifted education. Commissioner Moses assured the committee that the agency would work with the Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented to determine ways of encouraging districts to allocate more funds for materials and training.

The TAGT leadership will schedule a follow-up meeting with the Commissioner and Evelyn Hiatt, TEA's Director of Advanced Academic Services for further discussion of this issue.

For a complete version of the rules for Gifted/Talented Education as approved by the State Board of Education, May 1996, see page 50.

### Parents From San Antonio Area School District Test Legislative Intent of Senate Bill 1

Moms and dads of gifted and talented middle school students from a San Antonio area school district have won a major showdown with school district officials. When confronted with the elimination of middle school honors courses and a lack of administrative support to reintroduce the courses, protesting parents looked for help in Senate Bill 1, the omnibus education bill approved by the 74th Legislature.

SB 1 provided hope - the section indicating that at the request of "22 or more parents" a school district had to offer a course if that course was provided for students at another school in the district. The parents also discovered that two middle schools in the district did still offer honors courses. Citing SB 1 again, the parents petitioned the district once more to offer the courses.

School district officials disagreed with the parents' interpretation of SB 1 and requested a ruling from TEA, who in turn, consulted State Representative Scott Hochberg of Houston, who authored that section of the bill. Representative Hochberg's comment on the issue was, "If, by referring to an 'honors' course, you mean a course that offers material that is substantially different (including more difficult) from that which is otherwise offered, my answer is that these sections DO apply. In fact, it (the parents' request) is exactly the type of request that led me to draft (one of the sections).

"In writing SB 1, the Legislature put great emphasis on local control. I believe the ability of a local group of parents to request an honors course for their children, and to expect that such a request will not be reasonably denied, is consistent with this philosophy," Representative Hochberg said.

Also in support of the parents, Education Commissioner Mike Moses informed the school district that it was "required" to offer honors courses (at a school) if 22 or more parents request them.

*San Antonio Express-News* columnist Roddy Stinson concluded his May 9 article on this controversy by saying that the victory represented "one giant leap for parentkind."

This situation offers a good example of what a well-informed, determined group of individuals can accomplish on behalf of gifted youngsters. It is also a good reason to study and have available the new SBOE rules for gifted and talented education.

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(SEAY, from pg. 2)

Circulating in most schools are handouts entitled something like "100 Ways to Praise a Child." These are almost always evaluative; they are "This is what I think about you" phrases. If the child becomes dependent on someone else to make a judgment call for everything she is trying to do, there is the danger of her constantly needing an adult's reinforcement. She will be asking, "Is this right?" many times throughout the day, and you will be getting irritated because you know she knows that it is right.

A necessary addition to praise is encouragement. "You made the swim team (or passed your Pollywog!)" is praise, but adding, "You were willing to put in the hard work it took to do it," is encouragement. The goal of an encouraging remark is recognizing the child's energy, application, and feeling of satisfaction. Most of all, it avoids evaluative or empty praise.

The result we are looking for is the enhancement of the child's self-confidence. And that is built from feelings of success and satisfaction with a job well done, or at least done as well as he could. These feelings bring him closer to being an independent appreciator of himself, in contrast to the child who has to be reassured repeatedly that we think he is great and wonderful.

Another important phrase that should be added to praise (either spoken or written to your child) is, "How did you feel about it" which gives your child a chance to explore her own feelings about the behavior, and to feel an appreciation of the effort and the accomplishment. Feeling proud of one's self is a powerful motivator.

## Perfectionism

Perfectionism saps energy, takes the joy out of life, and complicates simple things. Workaholics and obsessively orderly parents who fear making mistakes and who blindly follow rigid rules may cause their children to grow into individuals who are handicapped by perfectionism. The same can happen with parents who are obstinate or inordinately frugal.

In *Too Perfect - When Being in Control Gets Out of Control*, Allan Mallinger explores a host of problems which controlling and inflexible "virtues" in our personalities can cause for ourselves and our children. Early in childhood, many children recognize that certain of their characteristics are not valued in their family - in fact they are actually disparaged. Such traits might include assertiveness, speaking one's mind, displaying frustration, anger or irritability, and many others. Gradually, these characteristics are repressed by the child and replaced with behaviors they deem more acceptable to one or both parents. The child learns to mask old emotions and impulses that clash with parent-approved attitudes and behaviors. As these youngsters grow, they are no longer conscious that in the core of their personalities these repressed feelings are festering and smoldering because such feelings do not go away until they are brought out into the open. If the repressed feelings are not dealt with, the child may become more and more perfectionistic. In this effort to be perfect, he hopes to alleviate his own doubts about his abilities.

Mallinger suggests that we may not even be conscious of the fact that we are hiding certain feelings from others and, even more importantly, from ourselves. As perfectionistic individuals, we will only have some lurking sense that something unacceptable is lying furtively beneath the veneer of our personalities. There seems to be a fearful feeling of the anticipation of being discovered and exposed. The individual may believe that he has a fundamental bad streak, or that he is incompetent or boring or a "nothing."

If you have a gifted child of your own, you may not find it hard to believe that children are capable of masking feelings and turning off. Often, even very bright and creative people see themselves as impostors who have so far been able to fool everyone, but who are in constant danger of being exposed as uncreative or unintelligent. This exposure is feared by the perfectionistic child, adolescent, or adult as a devastating possibility.

How does this happen? Gifted adults who are in therapy for controlling and obsessive behavior report having one or both parents who were perfectionistic, and who could be described as being (some or all): critical, negative, over-protective or stifling, hard-to-please (some thought impossible-to-please), intrusive, and exacting. Bright, sensitive children are thus caught in a no-win situation where they never feel they are good enough ("All A's except this B? Why didn't you bring this grade up?" or "You've dropped from a 98 to a 94. You need to be doing a lot more studying, missy!"). They never feel altogether secure. The children often perceive that their personal value is based on their parents' approval, which, in their perception, is not forthcoming. Parents may have an entirely different view of their parenting behaviors, but the incontrovertible fact is that what the child *thinks* is happening is the way life really *is* to that child.

Children sometimes see parents' words and actions as being contradictory. While the words talk of concern for the child, according to Mallingier, attitudes and behaviors send a different message. Parents tend to control the child's behavior until conformance to the rule is reflected; the rule seems more important than what the child is thinking, feeling, wanting, or fearing. A significant number of perfectionistic individuals have revealed that they didn't feel "liked" by one or both parents. They believed that they had made real efforts to meet the parents' expectations, only to receive more criticism or, at best, inconsistent support or appreciation.

### What to Do

What can parents do when they realize that they are being more controlling of a gifted child than is necessary, or that the children are getting the wrong kind of praise? One way to deal with children's feelings is by "mirroring." This is a reflection of the individual's feelings back to him, but a good way to practice is by just mirroring their words at first.

The first person to come in after I had read about this technique was Timmy, home from fourth

grade.

"Whew. I hate Mrs. Anderson."

Me (mirroring): "You hate Mrs. Anderson?"

"Yeah. She sent me to the principal, and I missed P.E."

Me (now I'm getting interested in this): "Mrs. Anderson sent you to the principal, and she kept you in from P.E.?"

"Yeah. I was just trying to get my pencil."

Me (almost forgetting to mirror): "You had to stay in from P.E. just for getting your pencil?"

"Yeah. Billy threw it out the window."

Me (still trying): "You went out the window and had to go to the principal and missed P.E.?"

"Yes, Mom, they can't just let people climb out the window without doing something to them!"

Another effective way to communicate with children is writing notes. When you realize you have been overcontrolling, you may not want to talk face to face with the child you were trying to control. Sometimes you get irritated into the fifth dimension when you just look at her, and arguments over insane things get started. But you do want to let her know that you think that you have been a bit overbearing, so write her a note.

Note writing is a valuable way to offer descriptive praise because you can think about it a bit longer. Note writing also gives the child an opportunity to write an answer back, and the responses can give parents some important insights into what their youngster is thinking and feeling.

You can write a note to express anger and frustration without making accusations. Using "I" messages, you can say, "I feel hurt (dismayed, shocked, angered, frustrated, nonplussed, intransigent) over what I believe was a careless use of my car (book, new shoes, brownies, etc.)" Use words they don't understand. It will help satisfy your vicious streak. And best of all, you can put a note on their pillow that says, "Sometimes it must be hard for you to tell, but I absolutely adore you." If that is too much for you, you can always say, "Son, I hate you less and less every day."

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Yes, notes are good.

(ENERSEN, from pg. 1)

The most effective step is for teachers to invite parents to be involved in the daily workings of their child's classrooms. Then, parents must accept the invitation enthusiastically. This combined commitment has more impact on children's success in school than anything parents or teachers do singularly. It is not something that happens automatically; there are no effortless ways for the work of educating children to be done. But because these are "our" children - the parents' and the teachers' - the outlay of time and effort is worth it.

Here are some ways this kind of involvement can be guaranteed:

1) Teachers meet in the first weeks of school with each child's parents to learn everything they can about the child: attitudes toward school, subjects of interest and knowledge, priorities as the parents see them, and results of any outside medical or educational evaluation. Think of this powerful combination of resources: The teacher's expertise in the craft and psychology of teaching, the parents' personal knowledge of the child, and everyone focusing on what the child needs. The necessary ingredients in this situation are the teacher's openness to hearing the ways in which a child may not fit the plan set out for this year, and the parents' clear and rational assessment of their children's abilities and needs. Parents can bring portfolios of their children's work and journals of parental observations concerning the child's learning patterns and behavior to this meeting. This allows teachers to begin immediately with appropriate instruction, rather than waiting weeks while getting to know the child. Making this information a matter of record also sets expectations for what should be accomplished to keep the child progressing.

2) At the same meeting, parents offer whatever they can in the way of help and support for the teacher. They can spend time in the classroom to work one-on-one with a child, lead a small special-interest group, donate items needed to enhance a topic of study, make materials at home, chaperone trips or study groups, or contact businesses for partnerships, trips, and materials. Gifted children - especially those in regular classrooms - need materials that may be difficult for the teacher to obtain. They may need books, computer software, materials for research projects, and other resources that are not readily available at a particular grade

level. We know that many children enter their new grades already knowing a significant percentage of the material that is planned for them during the year. Teachers and parents must work together to provide challenging work for these children so lack of opportunity will not keep them from learning every day.

3) On an weekday afternoon or a Saturday morning, teachers meet with a small group of parents and train them for work in the classroom. The parents learn what jobs are truly appreciated, how to lead a small group of children, how to be consistent with the classroom expectations and consequences, how to give specific and meaningful praise, and where their work will be waiting for them so the teacher will not be interrupted. An important consideration for teachers is to plan ways to show parents they and their contributions to the classroom are valued. Some schools keep volunteer hour records and reward parents with a luncheon or a special pin at the end of the year. The goal is everyone feeling valued in a working relationship that benefits the children.

4) Parents and teachers join groups together. The Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented (TAGT) and the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) are for teachers and parents. The conferences each organization offers have special sessions for teachers of gifted children, classroom teachers, and parents. These opportunities are enhanced when parents and teachers attend together, talk about what they learn, and look for ways to apply new ideas to "their" classrooms. Each organization also speaks in the state and federal legislatures on behalf of gifted children. Added benefits are reduced rates at conferences and the excellent publications that come along with membership: *Tempo* from TAGT; *The Gifted Child Quarterly*, a research publication of NAGC; and, new this year, *Parenting for High Potential*, also from NAGC. The publication and conference networks are well worth the price of membership, and a membership makes a great teacher gift.

5) Teachers and parents stay alert to opportunities outside of school that are of interest and value to gifted children. Schools are inundated with announcements of museum displays, art center activities, symphony and ballet performances, sports options, and special classes for computers, languages, art, etc. Teachers who look for offerings which touch the individual interests of his or her students will widen the classroom and utilize re-

sources the school doesn't provide. Parents who are active in the classroom and know what the children find fascinating can spot announcements, follow up to get specific information, and provide the teacher with details.

Parents and teachers who forge the kind of partnership these suggestions encourage will solve many problems cooperatively. If there is a concern about a child's progress, behavior, or any other facet of school life, the groundwork has already been laid for a successful resolution. This process is the most promising to handle concerns promptly and positively. However, there are a few pointers for parents about bringing concerns to the conference table:

a) Be sure there is a valid concern. If you know your child is not doing homework or studying for tests, it is pointless to schedule a conference and repeatedly say, "I don't know why she is failing." If you need help motivating your child to complete assignments, then ask for special strategies that can be implemented at home. If you have ideas for changes in the child's program, come with a well thought-out, workable plan.

b) Get your child's point of view before the conference by asking him or her neutral, informational questions that do not blame or escalate. Write down some of the important ways the child describes the situation.

c) Act promptly. Do not wait two or three weeks after an incident or too late to improve grades before making contact.

d) Schedule a conference and arrive on time. Just stopping by to bring up a concern is not fair to the teacher, who has responsibilities and time limits during the day. Plan for enough time to really discuss the concern and create a plan of action. Bring documentation and ideas you have for solving the problem. Bring a tape recorder or take notes so you can reflect on the conversation.

e) Stay calm. Use active listening and rational "I" statements. Remember that the child is your child; be alert for problems, be an active part of the solution, and be a tireless advocate for your child and children in general. Work for a positive outcome, but do not abdicate your child's education and well being to anyone - the teacher, the school, or society in general.

f) Send a note after the conference thanking the teacher for his or her time and restating the decided-upon course of action.

g) Follow the recommendations and action plan. Follow up closely to see that the problem is resolved.

The suggestions above take time and effort on the part of both educators and parents. There is no way to develop a successful partnership without an investment of interest and effort, but nothing succeeds for children like this special relationship between parents and educators.

As you relax and enjoy your summer, consider this September Challenge. Think about the new school year, and look for all of the ways to make the best things happen for your children.

(Donna L. Enersen is a Gifted Education Specialist in Lafayette, Indiana.)

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## New Home, New Challenges

Moving to a new city is always an adventure, but the adventure can turn stressful when parents realize a new city means a new school district. If you are planning to relocate, you should give top consideration to the services available for gifted and talented children when choosing where to live. To gather information, you can call the school district and get the name of the gifted education coordinator for the district and arrange to meet that person to discuss your child's past program experiences and future needs.

In addition, you should spend at least one full day observing what goes on in the classroom and gifted option (resource room, cluster group, self-contained class) that is available at the school your child would attend. Get the names of parents whose children are in the gifted education classes and call the parents to get their opinion of the program. These parents, or the gifted education teacher can give you information about groups for parents of gifted children.

Finally, meet with the principal to discuss mission statements and goals of the school as they pertain to gifted children. If the gifted services remove the child from the classroom, ask how missed work is handled. Ask about continuous progress for students, regardless of grade level and inquire about teacher training for teachers working with gifted and talented children. And remember, once you move, get involved.

## ADVOCATING FOR APPROPRIATE EDUCATION FOR YOUR CHILD

By Colleen Elam  
Fort Bend ISD

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition, defines advocacy as "the act of pleading or arguing in favor of something, such as a cause, an idea, or a policy; active support."

As parents, the cause that moves us to action is our children. We all want happy, successful children and we know that their education is essential to their success. Yet finding and maintaining a high quality, cost effective education for gifted children is not an easy task. Unfortunately, we cannot just pack their lunches, kiss their cheeks, and wave good-bye, confident their school days will be filled with opportunities for them to stretch to their potentials.

Gifted children are a challenge to schools. We understand - they are a challenge to us. But we also understand that if we offer gifted children the opportunity to stretch to their limits, our whole society will benefit. What must we do as parents to advocate for appropriate education? And how do we do it successfully?

Societal expectations exist in all aspects of life. There may be written rules of behavior and an established, documented protocol for many situations. But there are also unwritten rules of behavior and the degree to which we recognize and follow these rules determines the success we achieve in our quests. Here are some suggestions for successful advocacy for your gifted child.

### Learn the Status Quo

One of the most important tools for successful advocacy is becoming familiar with your child's school and the people in charge. Learn how your school and the school district are organized.

Begin by making an effort to meet the teachers, counselors, librarians, nurse, secretaries, and principals at your child's school. If your child is beginning a new school, make an appointment to tour the school with your child before opening day. If your child is attending the same school as the previous year, schedule a visit in August or early September during the day while your child is in class. Call several days before you plan to visit and leave a message for the teacher that you would like to visit the classroom and ask if she has particular times she would prefer you visit. This is to your benefit, in that you will gain the most from a visit if you are able to observe the teacher and students interacting. You do

not want to go to all the effort of a visit to only sit through a test or art time. Teachers also appreciate this advance call so they do not wonder if something is wrong.

Check in at the office when you arrive. Often visitors must sign in and wear a visitor badge or name tag for security purposes. Then walk through the halls, visit the library, the counselor's office, and the nurse's office. Introduce yourself to new staff members and reintroduce yourself to those who have returned. The school staff meet hundreds of parents - they may not remember you the second, or even the third time you meet. Observe the atmosphere of the school, the personalities of the staff, and the interaction of the students and staff.

Once in your child's class, sit in the back and observe the class setting, atmosphere, and how your child responds and interacts with his teacher and peers. If your child is in elementary school, have lunch with him in the school cafeteria. This will help you meet other children in his lunch group and observe the personalities surrounding your child.

These suggestions will help you come to understand your child's school, but to get an overall feeling of where the educational focus is in your district, you should attend a school board meeting. Observe how the meeting is run and how concerns are handled. Watch which speakers addressing the board are most effective and why.

After the meeting, introduce yourself to the administrators and school board trustees. Walk up, stretch out your hand, and say with a smile, "Hello! I'm \_\_\_\_." Reintroduce yourself each time you meet again until you are sure the person knows your name. When you talk with someone, you want them to be at ease so they absorb what you say. If they are searching their memory for your name, you will not have their undivided attention.

### Establish Yourself as An Ally to Education

Actively support appropriate education for all children through your words and deeds. Quality education depends on a partnership of students, schools, parents, and the community. Parents who project a positive image, who respect the efforts of all those involved in education, and who work with the schools for the benefit of all children are the parents who win the respect and the ear of the key decision

makers. Parents who show up just to complain, then disappear into the horizon again, win few allies to their cause.

Many parents, due to time constraints primarily, are consumed with the needs of their own children. To advocate for gifted children, parents need to take the time and exert the effort to show other parents that what benefits gifted children can benefit theirs, also. For instance, a school filled with National Merit Scholars enhances the reputation of the school and all who graduate from that school.

One way to demonstrate your support for your child's school is to read the school's mission statement and embrace it. Then, when talking with other adults about the school - or school administrators - you can refer to the mission statement.

Respect the traditions at your school. These can enrich the educational experience. Wild hair day, a pep rally, an egg rolling contest, and a Christmas tree in the classroom all offer opportunities to broaden the horizons of students.

Another way to demonstrate your support for the school and to win allies in the building is to volunteer in some capacity at school that will help many children. For instance, before any new book can be shelved in the school library it must be read by an adult. You could read some of the new arrivals on a regular basis for the librarian. If you read them to your children at home you could spend time with your own children while helping the school. Or you could bake the cookies and serve refreshments for the class that has no room mother. Or you could make presentations on career day, organize the science fair, or judge a speech and debate tournament.

There are myriad ways of volunteering and there should be no excuses. Everyone is busy. This is an investment in your child's education and future. Find something that you want to do, like to do, and do well. Volunteer in this capacity year after year so you become an integral part of the system. And stay involved through your child's entire school experience, not just in elementary school.

### Know What Should Be Happening

An educated and informed parent makes a better advocate for her children. Familiarize yourself with what is supposed to be happening in the classroom, in the school, and in the district. Read the handbooks, newsletters, and information sent home by the school and district. Know the state laws on gifted education. Read the research on gifted and other

educational issues of interest to you. Ask questions and learn the meanings of the terms used in "educationese."

Read some of the books on gifted children so you understand who these children are, how they learn, what they need, and why. If you know the facts about gifted children and the policies and programs that help and hinder them, you can argue these issues with other parents and educators who are not as well versed and therefore do not understand the need.

*Raising Champions*, compiled and written by Dr. Michael Sayler and available through Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented gives an excellent overview of the information crucial to parents of gifted with references to some of the most recommended books on the subject. Another book every parent of gifted should read is *Guiding the Gifted Child* by Dr. James Webb, Elizabeth Meckstroth, and Stephanie Tolan, and published by Ohio Psychology Press. This book provides a wealth of practical information that will hold you captive from cover to cover.

Another way to inform yourself on the issues surrounding gifted education is to obtain a copy of the state mandate for educational programs for gifted and talented students from the Texas Education Agency at 1701 North Congress Avenue, Austin, TX 78701-1494. Gifted education has been mandated in Texas since the 1990-91 school year. The wording of the law is changed periodically and it is important to stay abreast of the changes in state legislation.

Thanks to the 74th Session of the Texas Legislature, 1995 was a landmark year for education. For the first time since 1949, the Texas legislators embarked on a major attempt to revise and rewrite the laws for Texas public schools. The end result was an overhaul of the Texas Education Code, often referred to as Senate Bill 1.

One of the major themes in the revision is the emphasis on parental rights and responsibilities stipulated in Chapter 26. Another legislative change is the new rules and regulations on gifted/talented education that were approved by the State Board of Education in May (for more details on SBOE Rules see the pages 3-4 and 18-21).

Request a copy of Chapter 26 and the new rules from the Texas Education Agency. Education and the educational process are fluid; this flux allows parents the opportunity to initiate changes in education.

Still another way to become educated about needs of gifted students is to attend meetings of your local parent support group for the gifted and attend local presentations by speakers on the gifted or sessions at the TAGT annual state conference. If your school district doesn't not have a district-wide parent advocacy group for gifted education, form one yourself. Do not leave it for someone else to do. A large group of parents with a common goal for many children has a larger impact than one or two parents pleading for their own children. A district-wide gifted support group also provides an opportunity for parents to network with other parents and for gifted students to meet gifted students from other schools.

### **Give Credit for a Job Well Done**

One of the best ways to establish yourself as an ally is to recognize and acknowledge the effort of your school's faculty and staff. It's important to realize there are the obstacles hindering the educational process at any school, but with encouragement and support, problems can be solved. Take the time to say or write something positive to teachers, principals, administrators, and staff when they do something exceptionally well. Usually it is problems and objections that are voiced. Make an effort to commend jobs well done. Two lines and two minutes can make a teacher's day, renew her energy, and shore her efforts. At the end of the year write a letter to each of the good teachers your child had that year, thanking them for their teaching skills and their contribution to your child's education and our world's future. Send a courtesy copy to the principal. When the time comes for you to express a concern or voice an objection, your negative stand will carry more weight because you have been actively positive in the past.

### **Choose Your Battles**

Accept that everything cannot be perfect for everyone at all times. Explain to your children that life offers challenges and opportunities under many guises. Teach your children ways to overcome obstacles to their education and/or happiness. The ability to "turn lemons into lemonade" is a valuable asset through out life. Model this behavior in your life, maintaining a positive, can-do attitude.

Recognize issues that should be addressed by the school and act in a timely manner. If you wait weeks or months before acting, the options for change are reduced. Contact the appropriate person when you have a concern. It does no good to call another parent to complain. That parent does not have the power to make the change. Instead, prepare your case and

present it to the person with authority to make a change.

### **Prepare Your Case**

Once you have identified the problem that you would like your school to address, take the time to investigate the situation and research the facts. Universalize the problem. Relate it to the mission and goals of the school and community. Determine how it affects all the students and the community. Extrapolate consequences. Strive for a reasonable and rational case. Emotion tends to detract from your credibility and professionalism.

Write a synopsis of your case in order to organize your thoughts. State the problem as you interpret it, present the evidence of the problem, and then list alternatives that might alleviate the problem.

View the problem from the perspective of the student, the teacher, the principal, and the administrator. Determine student benefits, school benefits, economic benefits, and community benefits that would be a result of your proposal. Consider any problems that might occur with your proposal and options. Organize your thoughts and notes into an outline of what you want to discuss with the person with authority to make the decision. Compose your initial presentation so that you can succinctly state what you have to say in approximately one to three minutes. Always use "we," not "I" and "you." And remember to compose yourself before you punch in that phone number. Never call when you are angry or very emotional.

### **Present Your Case**

For a classroom problem contact the teacher first. For a school problem, speak with the principal. Follow the established chain of command in your district. Traditionally, the chain of command is: teacher > principal > instructional specialist > superintendent > board of trustees. If you are unsure of the protocol in your district, ask a secretary in the principal's office. Allow the person most directly involved the opportunity to hear your concern first.

Call for an appointment first, but be prepared in case the person is able to speak with you at that time. Leave a message with your name, your child's name, your telephone number at work and at home, and the reason for requesting a return call or appointment: "I would like to speak with Ms. Jones concerning the English group project assigned to her sixth period class last Monday." By leaving relevant information, the teacher can be prepared with any

materials in hand when she returns your call. This will save you both time. Allow 24 hours for your call to be returned, then call again. If your call is not returned after three tries, move up the chain of command.

Greet the person warmly. Your tone of voice can set the tone of the entire conversation and the consequent actions and reactions. Thank the person for returning your call or meeting with you. Then come immediately to the point. State your facts calmly and in order. Ask your questions or make your request. Then listen without interruption. Take notes on the response. Briefly repeat back your interpretation of what was said; if you need clarification of a point, this is the time to ask. If it is necessary for you to respond with an answer, agree on a time when you will communicate again.

Build bridges; do not burn them. No two people have the exact same beliefs on all issues. Through the years you will be aligned with some people today on one cause and other people in the future. Remain focused on your goal. Do not sidetrack onto a laundry list of complaints. Supply data to support your position and back it up with personal stories. Include yourself in the suggested win-win solutions.

If you are happy with the result of the meeting, say so and say thank you. However, if you are not happy, take your case to the next higher level on the chain of command and then the next. Do not skip a level unless you make an attempt to reach the person at that level and they are unavailable for an unworkable length of time. Keep trying, don't be discouraged and consider compromises.

Through this entire process, you are teaching your children. First and foremost, you are demonstrating in actions that you love them and consider their education a priority. Second, you are modeling some of the most important lessons in life: Every human counts, so respect others as well as yourself; problem solving involves creativity, logic, protocol, challenge, time, and commitment; think before you respond; take control of any situation as it occurs in your life; act, don't react; be positive and persistent and fight for what you believe in.

Even if your attempt at advocating for your child is less than successful, your children will have gained some valuable knowledge in living life and solving problems by watching you be involved in their education.

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*(Colleen Elam is a parent of one high school and one college student and lives in Sugar Land, Texas. In 1990 she was instrumental in founding Parents for ACademic Excellence, a parent-teacher support group for gifted education in Fort Bend Independent School District. (See article below.) She is Third Vice-President of TAGT in charge of Parent and Community Involvement.)*

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## PACE: THE CREATION OF A PARENT SUPPORT GROUP

Beginnings are inspiring, exciting, taxing. From a thought, to a flurry, to work. Compromises and accomplishments. Two steps forward, one step back. So it was with PACE, a parent group in the Fort Bend Independent School District formed in 1989.

Parents for ACademic Excellence "promote and encourage academic excellence in the Fort Bend ISD, particularly the education of gifted and talented individuals, by supporting and encouraging new and existing activities significant to their education," according to Colleen Elam, one of the founders of the group. The following is excerpted from the 1990 PACE Newsletter to give an example of how parent support groups can be formed.

The idea for PACE came in February of 1989 when the Fort Bend ISD Gifted/Talented Planning Committee began work on plans for the new gifted and talented program. After three months of work, Wayne Craigen, the gifted and talented specialist for the district, asked two parents to form a district-wide parent support group in the fall. Parents had attempted to begin school-based support groups for the gifted program, but the obstacles were great; the thought of forming a district-wide group was formidable.

(See PACE, pg. 28)

## BURNING BRIDGES OR CLEARING A PATH? A MOTHER'S REFLECTIONS ON WORKING WITH SCHOOLS TO DEVELOP TALENT IN HER SON

By Patsy Symank  
Arlington, ISD

In the first years of my sons' lives, our family was busy trying to lead a life without too much distress or noise. We decided I would stay home with our children. Although those years were wonderful, they were seldom quiet.

When it was time for my oldest son to go to school, I anticipated reading, writing, and arithmetic. What I did not anticipate was needing to develop effective communications between myself, my son, and the school.

It was clear to my husband and me that our sons Paul and Mark were unusual in their interests and thinking. So when it was time for Paul to start kindergarten, I called the school district's gifted and talented program. They gently referred me to the school Paul would attend in the fall. I got the impression that the district gets many such calls; everyone seems to believe their little darlings are bright. I learned that schools suggest to parents, even if never stating it directly, that their child is not that unusual and will, like all kindergartners, "level off and fit in nicely." Parents are told not to worry and to trust the school.

We were relieved when they assigned Paul to an "experienced" kindergarten teacher. Surely this person would recognize Paul's needs and know how to address them. She noticed immediately that Paul was different, but the things she observed were not what we'd expected. She told us Paul was too intense and should not read nonfiction books. Encyclopedias were his favorites. I was a little taken aback by his teacher's observations, but thought perhaps we had been wrong in encouraging Paul to read encyclopedias. After all, teachers were the education specialists. Because of this admonition, Paul did discover sports fiction books. A new area of reading opened up to him.

During this time I had many questions, but was not sure who to ask. I knew all children had unique needs. I was sure Paul's needs were no better or worse than anyone else. The school impressed me with its many dedicated teachers and all they tried to do for the kids. What I was beginning to realize though, was that not every school was "ready made" for any extreme needs. My assumption and expecta-

tion was that the school would know what was best for Paul. Unfortunately, this was not always the case.

I did not know what to do. There were many recommendations - sometimes contradictory - for educating very bright children. Homeschooling was something we'd been told we should consider and private school was recommended. Although the idea of homeschooling was initially intriguing, I realized that Paul's educational needs were too unusual for me to address with my levels of knowledge. When we investigated the private schools we felt we might be able to afford, none of them felt confident that they could adequately provide for Paul's needs.

First grade found Paul still in our local public school. His teacher was a talented woman with high levels of passion and caring. Her energy and hope renewed my spirits and reinvigorated my energy. She allowed Paul flexibility in his schooling. When he had displayed mastery of regular first grade content, she extended and enhanced his learning. This caused problems with other parents who wondered why their child could not get similar opportunities, regardless of their readiness. I later found out that this wonderful woman was fighting other battles with school officials who were concerned about things I had not considered. For example, if they allowed that Paul moved ahead in his content areas, what would happen when he got to high school?

Luckily, our persistence paid off. Through the hard work of the teacher and myself, we convinced the school to allow Paul to skip second grade. He had mastered all of the content long ago. This decision was not easy for school officials - special tests were given, meetings were held, concerns were aired before the final approval was given.

Paul started the fall not in grade two but in grade three. He met situations we had not considered. For example, unlike students in grade one and two, at our school, third graders change classrooms for each subject. This was a big change for Paul. He no longer stayed in the same room and at the same desk all day. He had to carry his school supplies with him from class to class and keep track of them. He had many teachers, each with different expectations

to meet instead of the single person he had in grade one. Advancing a grade did help Paul, but not everything went smoothly that year. Paul's bluntness and unwillingness to "let an issue go" was a point of tension with some of his teachers.

I was aware of these conflicts and was feeling frustrated. I believed then that I could effect desired changes in Paul's situation at school by being cooperative rather than aggressive in my interactions with the school. I took a very active role in the school. I worked as a room mother, volunteered in the office, and helped in many other school situations. In my effort to not be pushy or demanding, I probably had not placed enough emphasis on being a strong advocate for my child.

Having realized this, I took some small and tentative steps. Within a short time, it was clear to me that placement in third grade was still not challenging to Paul. This was especially evident in mathematics instruction. Seeing this, I swallowed my fear and questioned the appropriateness of the third grade math for Paul. To my surprise, they immediately moved him to fifth grade math.

Currently, Paul is 10 and in grade five. He travels daily to junior high for honors algebra. His inability to sit still for very long, his sharp retorts to others, and his struggle with fine motor skills and penmanship continues to frustrate him and us. Typical of other extremely gifted children, most everything about Paul is extreme (emotions, interests, etc.). His strongly held opinions often cause his teachers and me grief. On the other hand, he is being challenged academically and his study skills are finally developing. Socially, he has found eighth grade a more comfortable atmosphere. He enjoys sports and other activities with the other fifth graders.

We have found that the response, "We-can't-do-that-because-of-scheduling," is not cast in bronze. Paul plays the bass and needed training at a higher level than would have been possible in grade five. Unfortunately the junior high schedule conflicted with Paul's schedule and it appeared that he would not be able to take sixth grade string lessons. When his teacher recognized Paul's talent and needs, she amended his schedule to include sixth grade stringed instruments. She allowed him to attend shortened class periods with the older students. I am thankful for his strings teacher who, rather than have him lose the opportunity, found a way to get Paul into the appropriate class.

This year is the best so far. Paul continues to grow and do well in his studies. There still seem to be those whose actions that would make it harder for Paul to receive an appropriate education. There are also those who are most anxious to help us make good educational placements for Paul.

Our experiences have taught us that a willing teacher who sees the individual needs and talents of a specific child may be more helpful than one who sees students as groups with similar needs or who focus on the problems instead of the excitement of having a child with unique talents. This is true even of some teachers who have training in gifted and talented education. Even they sometimes see all gifted children as alike and having similar needs.

Paul's younger brother Mark is a 7-year-old in second grade. Mark has strong educational needs much as Paul did. Mark is not Paul and his needs and the way he manifests those needs is different from Paul's. Already, in second grade he is saying he abhors school and is developing some classic signs of an underachiever: incomplete assignments, disorganization, and carelessly done papers and products. Mark had the complicating factor of a mild speech problem and we recently discovered he needs glasses.

Mark's classroom behaviors might make him a candidate for removal from the high math group in second grade. However, due to the efforts of our campus advocate for gifted learners, they gave him several above-level tests. The results of the tests were astounding and surprised the second grade teachers and us. Mark was placed into a gifted fourth grade math class. His grades, classroom behaviors, and self-esteem have flourished and improved there.

A lesson we learned in this move is how important the attitudes and beliefs of the receiving teacher are. His fourth grade mathematics teacher is a willing partner to Mark's placement in her class. If Mark's second grade teacher and his parents alone wanted the move, it probably would not have worked.

Scheduling continues to be one of the biggest problems we face with children who take some classes with older students. When the school changed Mark's schedule in mathematics, it necessitated him taking music and P.E. with the first graders, due to the timing of mathematics classes in grade four and the schedule for grade two.

### Lessons We Have Learned

"At risk" students can happen at both extremes of the academic spectrum. The system likely will not take care of gifted kids unless parents are willing to get in there and fight for their needs.

I realize now how much more I could have done earlier for Paul and Mark. I let the school intimidate me too easily and I was afraid to speak up for my children.

I did not want to make waves or be one of those loud and bothersome parents about whom teachers complain. My fears kept me from being the advocate my children needed.

Our working with Paul and Mark's schools continues to be an exciting and eventful journey. I don't have all the answers for my sons, but I have come a long way from where I was several years ago.

I am much more confident that my district will work with me to find good interventions for my children and the other gifted children.

I have learned that the school personnel and I both need to respect the other's concerns and views. We are on the same side and can accomplish much when we work together.

*(Patsy Symank is the mother of two gifted children. They live in Arlington, Texas.)*

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**I have learned a few things that other parents and schools would find useful in meeting the needs of our gifted children. Parents should ask themselves:**

- Am I informed or educated on gifted education issues? Do I expect the "system" to take care of all the schooling needs of my child?
- Do I take charge and advocate for my child or lay back and hope for change next year?
- Do I respect the teacher's areas of expertise and commitment?
- Have I learned the appropriate school "chain of command?" Have I broken it by jumping to the wrong person with my concerns?
- Do I expect others to be respectful of my child's needs, yet I discount theirs?
- Do I volunteer at school? Do I volunteer only in areas that directly affect my child?
- Do I present what looks to others as an elitist agenda?
- When I request a conference with my child's teacher, have I thought about what I want to accomplish? Do I have a goal in mind?
- Do I bring my own personality conflicts into the situation?
- Am I willing to work toward a shared goal, or must I have my ideas implemented?
- Do I compete with other parents of gifted children?
- Have I looked for other parents, other advocates who live near me? Have I looked further?
- Do I search out and provide avenues of outside pursuits necessary for my child's well-being and balance?

*-Patsy Symank*

## A TASTE OF GIFTED AND TALENTED FOR PARENTS

By Elma Torres  
Orange Grove ISD

Communication is one of the most important ingredients within a school district. Indeed, in order to comply with Compliance Item A.1 [19 TAC 89.52 (a)(6)] which states "Districts provide orientation and periodic updates of students identified and served as gifted," districts must have clear, effective communication between school administrators, teachers and parents.

At Orange Grove Independent School District, several teachers - led by the district's former Gifted and Talented Coordinator, Pauline McClendon - developed a successful form of communication between parents and teachers. Having recently attended a TAGT conference and come home with a wealth of information from the various sessions, the teachers asked, "Why not host a mini-conference for parents right here in Orange Grove?" The result was an evening of informational presentations by gifted and talented teachers.

Refreshments, baby-sitting service, and various 20-minute sessions resulted in a successful connection between parents and teachers. Assisting parents in understanding the district's gifted and talented program, Reaching and Achieving Potential (RAP), was an important goal. Also, parents gained a better understanding of the necessity for a broad base of experience for gifted children at both home and school.

Many of the parents became students in a typical gifted classroom environment that evening and gained a deeper understanding of district policy and what their child's encounter with differentiated curriculum means to him at school and at home.

While we continue to update the parents of the children in our district's gifted education program with meetings, letters, and presentations, none has equaled the success of our "A Taste of Gifted and Talented For Parents" mini-conference.

Orange Grove ISD gifted and talented program suggests the following steps for planning a mini-conference for parents:

### **1. Send a survey home with several questions such as:**

a. What topic would you be interested in learning more about?

b. What day of the week is most convenient for you to attend an evening session?

c. What concern(s) would you like to see addressed at a mini-conference?

### **2. Use survey results to plan several sessions.**

Invite outside speakers if you wish; however, teachers in your district are your best resources. We saw stronger bonds between teacher and parent when the parent viewed the child's teacher as a knowledgeable and well-trained individual.

### **3. Preregister parents.**

Have parents fill out a form indicating which sessions they plan to attend, listing a 1st, 2nd and 3rd choice. Indicate that child care will be available on program nights.

### **4. Plan sessions and make arrangements to provide refreshments.**

Parents have enjoyed topics on censorship in high school literature, teaching methods used in the K-3 classroom, the 4-8 classroom and the 9-12 classroom, making course level and college level decisions with your gifted and talented child, behavioral characteristics of gifted and talented students, and parenting the gifted child.

The Orange Grove ISD Reaching and Achieving Potential program teachers have found a successful way to improve parent-teacher, home-school communication through use of our mini-conference. This event has brought about a better awareness of the needs and challenges faced by the gifted and talented students in our district and everyone has benefited as a result of more effective communication.

*(Elma Torres teaches Gifted and Talented Language Arts classes for students in grades six through eight in Orange Grove, Texas. She was recently named the 1996 Distinguished Teacher of South Texas by the Corpus Christi Caller Times)*

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## WHAT'S A POOR PARENT TO DO?

By Dorothy Kennedy  
Stevens Point, WI

One of the most pervasive myths in gifted education is that "all parents think their children are gifted." The implication is that we are surrounded by hordes of pushy parents out of touch with reality and demanding top quality education for their kids.

Would that it were so. I'm much more concerned about the many parents I know who settle for far too little for their highly capable children. To them I offer the following advice:

***If your child is completing all of his or her school work easily, quickly and perfectly, you should be concerned.*** This is a sign that the work is not challenging and that the child is not getting any exercise for the mental muscles. Children must learn to stretch their minds, to undertake tasks that are difficult and complex and to struggle with them. That's how growth occurs.

Progress doesn't come from flawless completion of low-level, routine tasks. Children who think that's what school is about can get turned off to the whole idea of school and begin to specialize in underachievement. Or they can develop a self-identity tied so closely to success-without-effort that the first time they face a more difficult task, instead of engaging in a productive effort, they fall apart.

***Try to develop an accurate perception of what your child is capable of.*** Read about the accomplishments of gifted children. View some videos about their projects. Visit some magnet classrooms where children are held to high, but attainable, standards. Knowing what other gifted children have done can help you reflect on your child's development and decide whether he or she needs more nourishment, or a different kind of nourishment. Just don't confuse pressure with nourishment.

***Know what kind of classroom environment will suit your child, and keep looking until you find it.*** Consider the teacher's attitude toward working with advanced learners. Does the teacher

genuinely like bright children and provide materials that delight them? Is the teacher a good facilitator - that is, does the teacher do a good job of helping children learn how to learn for themselves? Does he or she guide students to use a variety of resources to find information? Does the teacher encourage children to monitor their own learning and their own thinking?

Does the teacher design multi-layered tasks that involve complexity? Is there a focus on open-ended problems, or is there always one right answer? Can students proceed at their own pace, or is everyone locked into the same lesson at the same time? Are acceleration and enrichment both options? Is there some individualization - not only for children with disabilities, but also for children with advanced abilities?

***Intellectual and academic growth need not come at the expense of social success.*** Parents often make such comments as, "I don't want my child to be labeled a Nerd or a Brain. I think it's important for her to fit in and to have friendships." I understand this concern and agree that socialization is important. Adults (at school and at home) can help precocious children acquire social skills.

Teach them to understand other children, to listen to the words they use, to recognize their priorities, to learn how the system works and how to become part of it. In other words, use a child's cognitive power to promote socialization. But don't forget about the intellectual needs of that child. Tap into the strong drive for more information about a variety of topics. Help your child make sense of the world of social interaction and also the world of concepts, ideas and facts.

*(Dorothy M. Kennedy is the editor of News from the Network, a quarterly newsletter from the Network for Gifted Education, University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point.)*

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## MISINFORMATION IN THE INFORMATION AGE

by Susan Harper

It happened again today. I was in the grocery store and ran into one of my daughter's friends and her mother. The mother said, "Oh, your daughter is in PEAK! Congratulations! You must be very proud of her."

She said, "Congratulations!" like my daughter had made all-district on some athletic team, something for which she would have had to work hard to achieve. But that was not the case at all.

Yes, I'm very proud of her, and my son, but not because they are in PEAK (the gifted and talented program in the HEB Independent School district). They were tested and placed in a special program designed to keep them interested in school and help them learn to accept their learning differences. It is really designed to keep them from becoming at risk because of something they were born with, much like the students I teach every day in another school district.

My students have learning disabilities. They are hard to motivate, and they have experienced a large amount of failure by the time they get to high school. They are different and they know it. It's not cool to be different in a way that puts the spotlight on you in class. (Purple hair, shaved heads, and sagging pants are different - that gets the spotlight on them in the halls.)

Both of my own children have high-ability intelligence. That does not mean they are always high-achieving. Some things come easily to them, but many things do not. If you have a kid with similar abilities, you probably know what I mean.

People - including my friend at the grocery store - don't understand kids with special needs. We've made headway with the special needs classified as "disabilities" we even have a national act ensuring that the needs of persons with disabilities are always met. What people are slow to understand are the needs of children who are highly able.

I'm sorry that so much misinformation exists about gifted and talented programs such as PEAK. Look at the recent activity in the Dallas ISD's gifted and talented program. It has been the leading nightly news story several times this past year.

There is so much I want people to know about PEAK and gifted and talented kids. I want them to know that PEAK is not a reward. It is not something a regular classroom teacher can withhold as punishment. (Just like Content Mastery cannot be withheld from a student with learning disabilities.) I want people to know that high-ability kids can be - and often are - low-achieving. They can be hard to challenge and impossible to keep interested. They can be hard to reason with because they sometimes are gifted with reasoning ability far beyond their years, yet they don't understand the purpose of the reason. The gifted kids can feel failure and expect perfection to such degrees that they just quit.

Some quit school. Some quit life. All at once, or a little at a time, and it is a tragic waste. There are some very bright, highly able, talented people languishing in prisons because somewhere along their line, they didn't learn to work in the system.

The purpose of PEAK, as I see it, is not to make the world fit the student, but to help the student fit into and succeed in the world. The PEAK class is a place for these kids to feel like they are "normal" while they are learning the best ways to impact their world. They aren't expected to be the group leader, or to make 100's on all their papers. They are merely one of the gang in PEAK.

We all have concerns and want our children to get the best education they can. We want the school system to provide everything it should for all children. I don't want kids to be molly-coddled or taught that abilities and/or disabilities are excuses. In fact, I want just the opposite. I want them to learn reality-based consequences. I want all our children to have the chance to be children. I want PEAK to be suitable for all kids with giftedness, not just the ones who are gifted in the verbal reasoning/language arts area.

Mostly, I want the kids who are future Einsteins and Curies, Wrights and Earharts, Roosevelts and Rockefellerers, Montessoris and Edisons to enjoy and share their gifts as much as the future Cummingses and Anjelous, Clintons and Frosts, Twains and Alcotts.

*(Susan Harper is a parent in the Hearst, Euless, Bedford ISD. This article is reprinted from the HEB Gifted and Talented newsletter.)*

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# TEXAS LAW AND PARENT RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

By Ann Wink  
Killeen ISD

Thanks to the 74th Session of the Texas Legislature, 1995 was a landmark year for education in this great state. For the first time since 1949, the Texas legislators embarked on a major attempt to revise and rewrite the laws for Texas public schools. The end result was an overhaul of the Texas Education Code, alias Senate Bill 1. One of the major themes in the revision is the emphasis on parental rights and responsibilities stipulated in Chapter 26. These strong statements enacted into law acknowledge and underscore the role of parents in education. The Texas Legislature has done its part for education. Now it is up to parents and schools to follow through. Consider some of the opportunities Chapter 26 opens for parental involvement. (Italicized comments are the author's.)

## **Sec. 26.001; Purpose**

(a) Parents are partners with educators, administrators, and school district boards of trustees in their children's education. Parents shall be encouraged to actively participate in creating and implementing educational programs for their children.

(b) The rights listed in this chapter are not exclusive. This chapter does not limit a parent's rights under other law.

(c) Unless otherwise provided by law, a board of trustees, administrator, educator, or other person may not limit parental rights.

(d) Each board of trustees shall provide for procedures to consider complaints that a parent's right has been denied.

(e) Each board of trustees shall cooperate in the establishment of ongoing operations of at least one parent-teacher organization at each school in the district to promote parental involvement in school activities.

*This purpose statement grants parents rights plus charges them with responsibility in the education of their children. In this era of demands for accountability, the law now states that parents and schools are jointly responsible. The first step to partnership is communication. A parent-teacher-administration organization provides a non-threatening opportunity for communication, focus, and cooperation. This "parent-teacher organization at each school" stipulated in (e) does not have to be a*

*traditional PTA or PTO. There is no definition of "parent-teacher organization" in Senate Bill 1.*

*The purpose of (e) as stated is "to promote parental involvement in school activities." Parents and schools have the option of maintaining or structuring an organization that works towards this purpose on their site. It is also acceptable for small districts already utilizing an effective K-12 Parent Teacher Association to maintain this strong PTA and to designate a parent representative from each school to be the liaison to the K-12 Parent Teacher organization.*

## **Sec. 26.002; Definition**

*In this chapter, "parent" includes a person standing in parental relation. The term does not include a person as to whom the parent-child relationship has been terminated or a person not entitled to possession of or access to a child under a court order. Chapter 26 does not address joint custody, conservatorship, parental disagreements, or similar scenarios. School districts will continue to follow any applicable court orders regarding direction of a student's education.*

## **Sec. 26.003; Rights Concerning Academic Programs**

A parent is entitled to:

(1) petition the board of trustees designating the school in the district that the parent's child will attend, as provided by Section 25.003;

(2) reasonable access to the school principal, or to a designated administrator with the authority to reassign a student, to request a change in the class or teacher to which the parent's child has been assigned, if the reassignment or change would not affect the assignment or reassignment of another student;

(3) request, with the expectation that the request will not be unreasonably denied:

(a) the addition of a specific academic class in the course of study of the parent's child in keeping with the required curriculum if sufficient interest is shown in the addition of the class to make it economically practical to offer the class;

b) that the parent's child be permitted to attend a class for credit above the child's grade level, whether in the child's school or another school, unless the board or its designated representative expects that the child cannot perform satisfactorily in the class; or

c) that the parent's child be permitted to graduate from high school earlier than the child would normally graduate, if the child completes each course required for graduation;

(4) have a child who graduates early as provided by Subdivision (3)(c) participate in graduation ceremonies at the time the child graduates. The decision of the board of trustees concerning a request described by Subsection (a)(2) or (3) is final and may not be appealed.

*One of the questions that parents moving to Texas most frequently ask TEA is, "What is the best school district in the \_\_\_ area of Texas?" The similar question asked of gifted program administrators across Texas is, "What is the best school in your district?" here is no "best" school in any district or in Texas. Every school has positive and negative attributes, successful and floundering programs. In addition, these attributes and programs are fluid. So how does a parent determine the best school for a child?*

*An example of a better question to ask a gifted program coordinator would be, "What gifted programs do different schools in your district offer different programs?" Then contact each school mentioned by the administrator. Ask the principal or counselor about the opportunities in place now that make it possible for gifted students to realize their individual potentials. Visit the schools and compare carefully. TAAS test scores do not tell the complete story. Find the right match for the individual student. After enrolling the child, volunteer in the school, participate in the parent-teacher organization, and support the school, the teachers, and the students.*

*This law does not limit a request for a student assignment change to a particular time during the school year. A parent may petition the board of trustees with respect to the school assignment of the student as provided by Section 25.003. A parent is also guaranteed reasonable access to a designated administrator to request a change in the class or teacher to which the parent's child has been assigned. A request for a change of class or teacher calls for careful consideration and delicate diplomacy on the part of the school and the parent.*

*As in any profession, there are good teachers and there are ineffective teachers. The teacher who is the all-time favorite of your neighbor's child and the teacher-of-the-year at school, may be the worst for your child. In the same vein, the best teacher is not always the gifted and talented teacher and the best class is not always the gifted or talented class. Realistically, we must accept that a child will not have the "best" teacher every year. However, there are times when a class or teacher should be changed to alleviate a situation that is detrimental to the growth of the child. Teaching styles and learning methods can conflict. Personalities can be incompatible. A request for a change will be seriously considered if there is evidence of reason and if protocol is followed.*

*First alert the teacher to the problem. Teachers are professionals trained to deal with children. If there is no improvement, the next step is the department head and then the principal. An appeal would then be taken to central administration and then the local board of trustees. One way to assess the class is to look at the number of exits requested in the last few years.*

*Make an appointment to speak with the principal concerning the addition of a class. Present a written outline with your proposal. Include a synopsis of what the course would cover, how it would be valuable to students, and how it would compliment the current curriculum. Ask the principal how many students would be needed to form a class. This number varies school to school. Generally, 20 or more students would make the addition feasible. Inquire in time for the proposed class to be listed in the school's course selection materials so the entire student body would have an opportunity to consider the class.*

*The law does not require that transportation be provided for the child to another site for instruction.*

*The hue and cry in high schools across Texas at this point is to make offerings so rich and inviting that students do not want to leave a year early.*

#### **Sec. 26.004; Access to Student Records**

A parent is entitled to access to all written records of a school district concerning the parent's child, including:

- (1) attendance records;
- (2) test scores;

- (3) grades;
- (4) disciplinary records;
- (5) counseling records;
- (6) psychological records;
- (7) applications for admission;
- (8) health and immunization information;
- (9) teacher and counselor evaluations; and
- (10) reports of behavioral patterns.

*Screening records takes time. In order to glean the most in the least amount of time parents should call the school first to schedule an appointment to review a child's records. Be specific as to what you wish to see. It may be preferable to put your request in writing so there are no misunderstandings. Get all clearances and permissions before your appointment time. Allow enough time to read the records and then to discuss them with the counselor or school administrator. Ask for an explanation of what the tests or records indicate and how they are used.*

#### **Sec. 26.005; Access to State Assessments**

Except as provide by Section 39.023(d), a parent is entitled to access to a copy of each state assessment instrument administered under Section 39.023(a), (b), or (c) to the parent's child.

#### **Sec. 26.006; Access to teaching materials**

(a) A parent is entitled to:

(1) review all teaching materials, textbooks, and other teaching aids used in the classroom of the parent's child; and

(2) review each test administered to the parent's child after the test is administered.

(b) A school district shall make teaching materials and tests readily available for review by parents. The district may specify reasonable hours for review.

*This section provides access to all teaching materials used in the classroom as well as all tests including teacher-made tests administered to students. Tests are not accessible until after the test is administered. The district may place reasonable restrictions on the time during which access is available to protect test security and ensure teacher*

*access to teaching materials. A district which uses standardized tests under a contract which requires confidentiality, for example SAT, ITBS, ACT, CTBS, and IQ tests, should request an Attorney General's opinion upon receiving a parental request for access which conflicts with the contract and may wish to consider the use of waivers for such tests.*

#### **Sec. 26.007; Access to Board Meetings**

(a) A parent is entitled to complete access to any meeting of the board of trustees of the school district, other than a closed meeting held in compliance with Subchapters D and E, Chapter 551, Government Code.

(b) A board of trustees of a school district must hold each public meeting of the board within the boundaries of the district except as required by law or except to hold a joint meeting with another district. All public meetings must comply with Chapter 551, Government Code.

*Any school board "retreat" that is a "meeting" as defined by the Open Meetings Act must be held within the district.*

#### **Sec. 26.008; Right to Full Information Concerning Your Child**

(a) A parent is entitled to full information regarding the school activities of a parent's child except as provided by Section 38.004.

(b) An attempt by any school district employee to encourage or coerce a child to withhold information from the child's parent is grounds for discipline under Section 21.104, 21.156, or 21.211, as applicable.

#### **Sec. 26.009; Consent Required for Certain Activities**

(a) An employee of a school district must obtain the written consent of a child's parent before the employee may:

(1) conduct a psychological examination, test, or treatment, unless the examination, test, or treatment is required under Section 38.004; or

(2) make or authorize the making of a videotape of a child or record or authorize the recording of a child's voice.

(b) An employee of a school district is not required to obtain the consent of a child's parent

before the employee may make a videotape of a child or record or authorize the recording of a child's voice if the videotape or voice recording is to be used only for:

(1) purposes of safety, including the maintenance of order and discipline in common areas of the school or on school buses;

(2) a purpose related to a cocurricular or extracurricular activity; or

(3) a purpose related to regular classroom instruction.

*Note that Chapter 26 does not affect videotaping on school buses for the purpose of safety and discipline. The prohibition against videotaping is limited to school employees. Therefore it does not prohibit a television station from videotaping a child.*

#### **Sec. 26.010; Exemption From Instruction**

(a) A parent is entitled to remove the parent's child temporarily from a class or other school activity that conflicts with the parent's religious or moral beliefs if the parent presents or delivers to the teacher of the parent's child a written statement authorizing the removal of the child from the class or other school activity. A parent is not entitled to remove the parent's child from a class or other school activity to avoid a test or to prevent the child from taking a subject for an entire semester.

(b) This section does not exempt a child from satisfying grade level or graduation requirements in a manner acceptable to the school district and the agency.

*When a parent exempts a child from instruction due to religious or moral beliefs, the district must provide alternative instruction for the student if such instruction is necessary in order for the child to meet all the essential elements for that class from which the child is removed. The placement of a child during this period of exemption is in the discretion of the district. The district should ensure that the child is supervised and that the child receives instruction if necessary.*

#### **Sec. 26.011; Complaints**

The board of trustees of each school district shall adopt a grievance procedure under which the board shall address each complaint that the board receives concerning violation of a right guaranteed by this chapter.

This says if you feel the rights granted you in this chapter of the law have been denied, you should be able to find board-approved policy for filing a grievance.

#### **Sec. 26.012; Fee for Copies**

The agency or a school district may charge a reasonable fee in accordance with Subchapter F, Chapter 552, Government Code, for copies of materials provided to a parent under this chapter.

*If you request a copy of a test, your child's records, or any other document that this law gives you the right to a copy of, the district may charge a reasonable copy fee.*

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I have explored many opportunities granted parents in Chapter 26 to be come involved in their children's educations. You need to exercise your rights as needed, but you also need to be informed and well prepared as you do.

As Americans we know that with rights come responsibilities. Therefore, we need to do our homework and look at all sides of an issue and be informed as to the best practices in education to truly be partners with the educators who work in the schools everyday.

As an educator I can tell you we welcome informed, involved, sincere parents into our schools. If your children are to receive the best education possible, we must form a partnership to make it happen.

*(Ann Wink is the Coordinator of Gifted Programs in Killeen, Texas and Immediate Past President of the Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented)*

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## FORGING EDGES: EXCELLENCE VIA PARTNERSHIP

by Cynthia Specia Shade, Ph.D.  
Edgewood ISD

In Edgewood Independent School District, a partnership between school and community members resulted in an expanded gifted and talented elementary education program in our school. Through systematically gathering data from multiple sources, Edgewood ISD's gifted and talented personnel were able to expand the EDGES (Education Designed for Gifted Edgewood Students) program, to include low socio-economic Hispanic students. Our desire was to expand the direction and scope of the EDGES' curriculum and to provide educational opportunities that would prepare all our students for the 21st Century.

Gifted and talented education is an integral part of instruction in Edgewood ISD, therefore, students, teachers, parents, community members, university partners, campus administrators, and central office administrators were interested in seeing an expanded program succeed. More than a thousand people gave ideas that ultimately designed future services for our gifted and talented students. With so many interested parties, the process of developing a new model for our gifted and talented elementary education program needed to be systematic. The EDGES restructuring process moved through seven phases.

### Research

The first phase was based on current research. Research articles and textbook information on gifted and talented education were examined (e.g.: Rogers, 1991; Runco, 1993; Maker, 1982; Udall, 1989; Silverman, 1993; Maker, 1993; Renzulli, 1986). Some of the topics investigated were grouping practices, research-based decision making, creativity for disadvantaged students, teaching models in education of the gifted, curriculum for gifted Hispanic students, counseling the gifted & talented, gifted in the regular classroom and the schoolwide enrichment model.

### Practitioners' Discussion

The second phase was based on discussions of the research in relation to our past experiences in Edgewood ISD. After reviewing research articles, discussions were held with teachers who had been working directly with students. Seven sessions were conducted between August and early October. As expected, these discussions provided insight into

what types of practices were successful with low socio-economic Hispanic student populations.

The teachers stressed the importance of selective incorporation of programs into the EDGES' curriculum. The programs needed to be culturally appropriate, challenging, and proven successful. Success was defined as the programs lasting a number of years, receiving national recognition, or being cited as successful in research literature.

### Awareness & Discussion Sessions

The third phase allowed for the collection of general ideas from the interested parties - students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members. Seven awareness sessions with various groups were held between October and February. All the meetings were informal and if the group was large participants were divided into groups of 10 to 12 people in order to facilitate open discussions and generate the maximum number of ideas. Information gathered from these sessions, along with information from research literature and our personal experiences provided enough information to develop a survey. Our goal was to discover the opinions, ideas, concerns, and perceptions of the interested parties.

### Survey

Two surveys were used, one for students in the gifted program and one for parents, community members, teachers and administrators. The first survey was given in December to gifted and talented Hispanic students who would be involved in the expanded EDGES program model. They were asked questions concerning schoolwork, including how challenging the material was to them. Typical questions were:

How important is math?

How talented are you in language arts?

How often do you think you work hard in social studies?

What grade do you usually earn in science?

How many minutes of gifted and talented homework do you usually do each night?

In February, we surveyed 611 parents, community members, teachers and administrators. Three sample questions appear below.

- Computer technology should be extensively used in gifted and talented education classrooms:
  - A. Strongly agree
  - B. Agree
  - C. Neither agree or disagree
  - D. Strongly disagree
- In your opinion, how challenging is the Edgewood gifted and talented education program in grades 3, 4, and 5?
  - A. Not at all challenging
  - B. Somewhat challenging
  - C. Appropriately challenging
  - D. At times somewhat too challenging
  - E. Overly demanding
- Would you be willing to have students bused to an elementary school other than their home campus for gifted and talented education instruction?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
  - C. Not sure

Student answered surveys were analyzed by the National Research Center for the Gifted and Talented in April. The second survey was statistically analyzed by Dr. Max Martin of Edgewood's Research & Evaluation Department. Dr. Martin developed visual transparencies to depict survey data. This made follow-up presentations easy for the average person to understand.

After the data was evaluated, phase five began. Meetings were held with all the interested parties to relate survey results. Possible models were discussed. Finally, research, survey data, and majority opinions were melded into a model that would be a winning instructional tool to meet the needs of the students, satisfy interested parties, and fulfill Texas Education Agency (TEA) guidelines.

### Pilot Model Sites

Phase six included piloting a transitional model in schools whose principals volunteered to implement the enhanced gifted and talented elementary model. Four elementary schools participated in the pilot. While the pilot schools were implementing the model, we sent gifted and talented teacher-facilitators to the other 12 non-pilot schools to help them plan and organize for implementation the following year. During the pilot year, we learned a great deal about what worked and what didn't and were able to apply our knowledge when advising our 12 non-pilot schools.

The expanded gifted and talented model consists of three components: a pull-out program, an inclusion program, and an enrichment program.

### *Pull-out Time*

The lead gifted and talented education teacher "pulls out" gifted and talented students for at least 2 hours and 30 minutes each week for gifted and talented education services. During this time, students are clustered with identified gifted and talented students for instruction. Depending on the number of identified students at their campus, one or perhaps two grade levels may be grouped together for instruction.

### *Inclusion Services in the Regular Classroom*

Our stakeholders felt that 2 hours and 30 minutes of gifted and talented instruction was not enough instructional time. To increase services, our grade level teachers differentiate the regular curriculum. One teacher on every grade level at each elementary school is trained in gifted and talented education to ensure that the gifted students are continuously challenged and that they have access to qualitatively different curriculum every day. The classroom population consists of gifted and talented students who are on same grade level. However, if the group is small, there are some other high achieving students added to the group in order to have an appropriate class size.

### *Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) for all Students*

Since our students come to school with very few enrichment opportunities, we believed that we needed enrichment for all students. Thus, we elected to include Renzulli's *Schoolwide Enrichment Model*

in our program. SEM provides enrichment experiences for all students through various educational encounters. The SEM model leads the student through awareness experiences (Type I), the learning of a process (Type II), and the development of a product or independent study (Type III).

All students have access to exploring a wide variety of learning experiences and may choose their own level of involvement. A teacher-facilitator on each campus coordinates students' interests with their selected activities. This allows both unidentified and identified gifted and talented students to follow their dreams, complete independent studies, and explore new content areas in or outside of the school walls. Working in SEM, teachers learn to teach through non-traditional methods and increase their repertoire of teaching strategies.

### Staff Development

Staff development is a must for program success. From our survey, we discovered that only our lead gifted and talented education teachers had obtained sufficient staff development in this field. In addition, we found that most of our grade level teachers had no training in gifted education. Thus, an extensive training program occurred during September 1993 through November 1995. Over 200 grade level teachers received the basic 30 hours of gifted and talented education training. One school committed to have every professional staff member attend the 30 hour inservice.

### Three-Year Process

Our expanded program was redesigned the first year, piloted the second year, and implemented the third year. Currently, we are in the year of full implementation of our elementary model. Teachers, principals, paraprofessionals, and parents like our expanded model. The process has been long and

arduous. However, by working together and moving in a logical manner, we have designed a program that is research based, community supported, and is meeting the needs of our culturally diverse gifted students in EISD.

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- (Dr. Cynthia Specia Shade is a Gifted and Talented Education Coordinator with Edgewood ISD, in San Antonio, TX. She has developed an identification system for identifying low socio-economic status Hispanic students and designed and implemented gifted education in grades K-12. )

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## THE TEXAS ACADEMY OF LEADERSHIP IN THE HUMANITIES PROVIDES A MODEL SETTING FOR TEXAS SCHOLARS

Dorothy Sisk, Ph.D.  
Lamar University

The state of Texas is experiencing accelerated change due to increased information and technology within a society that is increasingly more multicultural. Today's schools must keep pace with these changes in society, look to Texas' future, and prepare our young people for the emerging possibilities. A recent poll of over 400 CEO's identified needed qualities for the workforce 2000, including problem solving, communications skills, and a commitment to the values that have contributed to the positive qualities of American society. The area of humanities is a natural vehicle for the development of these qualities, in that the humanities reflect mankind's struggles and solutions to the basic issues and problems of life.

The Texas Academy of Leadership in the Humanities (TALH) provides a model setting for Texas scholars to develop their academic potential to contribute to the future of Texas.

TALH was established in 1993 by the Texas State Legislature as a two-year, residential, early-admissions university program for high school students with interest and outstanding achievement in the humanities. Students are selected during their sophomore year in high school for admission to the Academy in the fall of their junior year. TALH provides Texas gifted students the opportunity to complete their last two years of high school and their first two years of college concurrently in residence on the Lamar University campus in Beaumont.

The first class of 30 students enrolled in the fall of 1994 and the second class of 100 students enrolled in the fall of 1995. TALH plans to admit 200 students in the fall of 1996.

TALH addresses the problem of gifted students who need the challenge of an in-depth academic environment to develop their leadership and academic potential. With the current emphasis on restructuring education, TALH provides gifted high school students an opportunity for academic advancement with outstanding university professors in

an atmosphere of excellence. Major problems - poverty, pollution, overpopulation, hunger, energy, war, peace, health, aging, crime and violence are explored through the liberal arts and sciences.

In TALH, young potential leaders learn to live effectively with others and to use their leadership skills and creativity in addressing real problems. A special effort is made to recruit minority gifted students to insure their involvement in the program and to develop future leaders within the minority populations. The 1995 class is comprised of 27% minority students.

The TALH "family" of instructors, administrators and counselors are carefully selected to assist the students in demonstrating that high goals and leadership are obtainable.

A special focus of the TALH program is the provision of a cooperative learning atmosphere to support the diverse community of learners through special cultural activities and social events that are age-appropriate.

Students in the program are responsible for their tuition and fees, as well as room, board and book costs. Scholarships and financial aid are available for students in need of assistance and half of the current class receives financial assistance.

In May, 18 students graduated from the Academy and all received entrance to their college of first choice. The following two articles, one from a graduating student and a second from his parents, reflect the effectiveness of TALH in meeting the needs of gifted secondary students.

*(Dorothy Sisk, Ph.D., is currently the C.W. Conn Professor at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas, where she directs the Texas Academy of Leadership in the Humanities, the Gifted Children Center, the Center for Creativity, Innovation and Leadership, and coordinates teacher training in gifted education.)*

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## LEAVING HIGH SCHOOL EARLY: A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

by John Adams and Sherry Green-Adams

Making the challenging decision to allow a 10th-grader to leave home prior to completing a hometown high school raises a number of questions. We think the gifted and talented programs mandated by the Texas Legislature are long overdue. Those gifted students who are motivated to achieve beyond the high school environment and are capable of doing so should be allowed to. However, even the strongest advocates of an enhanced education via a gifted and talented program in a university environment must pause a second to reflect on the impact to the child and the family.

We began the application process at the Texas Academy of Leadership in the Humanities and within weeks, our son was accepted to the program at Lamar University. Our concern over whether Calvin was ready to go (and his mother willing to let him go) shaped family discussions during the days before the final decision. The question of preparation and timing was clouded by both a concern for the unknown and doubt expressed to us by those who did not understand the role and focus of a university program for the gifted and talented. Friends, grandparents, and the local high school all expressed doubt and genuine concern. Administrators at the local high school were slow to respond to requests for assistance, due to their limited knowledge of the program and preconceived notions. One of the administrators kept saying Calvin was not going to get the "local high school experience".

In the final assessment, we decided that our son could hang around home and high school unchallenged (he would have finished all of his high school requirements and could have graduated at the end of his junior year) or he could go to the Academy leaving home with our support. One driving force that hastened our decision was Calvin's diligence to check out all the options, to participate in charting his future and to convey to us that this was no whim. He told us he would fully apply himself fully at TALH.

Calvin is generally a self-starter, well-traveled, a grand national champion in numerous 4-H events, and is always very curious about the world around him. With this background, he quickly excelled at Lamar. The classes were a real challenge and with the association of other students bound on excelling, he truly found a niche. He finished the first year at the head of his class and his focus quickly shifted to sorting through a number of options as to where to

continue his studies. He had already figured out that a high SAT and high class ranking would not be enough. The Lamar program exposed him to a number of options and assisted in setting up interviews as well as campus visits.

Being in a university environment, Calvin was further exposed to new avenues of study, all of which would figure heavily in the selection of his next university. Lamar helped open the door to study in both Cuernavaca, Mexico, and San Jose, Costa Rica, during breaks, as well as a summer semester at Vanderbilt University. This was all followed by an East coast tour with his TALH classmates to a number of Ivy League universities. By his last semester, his focus had narrowed and his intentions were to study international law and economics. Being one of a few to be accepted out of 6,000 applicants to the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., as well as a private tour of the State Department and a Presidential Luncheon at Georgetown helped clinch his decision.

TALH opened new horizons of thought and challenge for Calvin. The interaction in university classes and the broad cross section of activities were a challenge and a timely part of his education. Without a doubt, the experience helped qualify him for admission to any university he chose to apply to.

The Academy required an adjustment and commitment on Calvin's part at a time when he could have taken the easy path. He was away from home, but over time it was not hard to adjust to having friends both at home and at Lamar; this experience was both healthy and an eye opener. The Lamar program required him to matriculate like all the rest of the students. Room and board were soon discovered not to be the same as living at home. This unplanned expense and investment in the future of Calvin's education and maturity will be repaid a million times over during the upcoming years.

We were cautious and caring. In the final analysis, Calvin is too gifted and highly motivated to achieve for us to have let him remain at home in high school. We had to do the most we possibly could to allow him to be challenged and grow in self-confidence. We see the benefits of the past two years everyday. At TALH, he learned to set goals and plan for his future, was exposed to new ideas, and will be ready for his next challenge.

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## TALH: A TURNING POINT IN MY LIFE

By Calvin John Green

The Director of the Texas Academy of Leadership in the Humanities, Dr. Dorothy Sisk, once told me, "It is not what you have done or what you are doing, it is what you are going to do that is important."

I feel that this statement holds true in most cases, for people quickly forget what we have done in the past, and will soon forget what we are doing. We must continuously endeavor to achieve greater success through future actions, or risk sliding back down the slippery slope of life to become a "has been." I pattern my life after this philosophy, using each achievement as a building block to accomplish something greater. While making every effort to excel in current activities, I am also planning my next endeavor, for I believe that although we should live for today - making every effort to be the best we can be - we must also plan for tomorrow because, when it comes, we do not want to be caught off guard.

After spending the last two years at the TALH, I am going to attend the Walsh School at Georgetown University, the oldest and the best school of foreign service in the world. With the advance standing that I have earned at the Academy, assuming I continue to excel at Georgetown, it will be possible for me to spend a year abroad in Argentina and still graduate on schedule, not only earning a bachelor's and two certificates (minors), but also a master's in foreign service.

The guidance counselor at my old high school once advised me to slow down, or I would run out of things to do. She was correct, I did run out of things to do after I had completed most of the advanced courses that my high school offered, held leadership positions in virtually every organization, and became the reserve world horse judging champion by my sophomore year.

She was not correct, however, in her postulation that I should slow down. I realized that I had only one option and that was to find a more challenging environment. It was obvious that I needed to look to the university sector for a solution. Luckily, innovators at Lamar University, in cooperation with the Texas Legislature, had the foresight to establish an advanced program for students such as myself, the Texas Academy of Leadership in the Humanities. I applied to the program and was among the first class of 30 high school students selected to attend from

throughout Texas. Among other things, the caring administrators, conversation with equally motivated peers and excellent professors helped me to adjust well to my new environment, and the Academy soon became like a second family to me.

At TALH I again excelled to my full potential both academically and extra-curricularly. The first year of the Academy and the rigorous courses I enrolled in helped to challenge me, and this "mental exercise" helped to raise my SAT score over 300 points.

I have helped Dr. Sisk represent the Academy at several functions - including meeting with senators and representatives at the state capitol - and have held numerous leadership positions both within the academy and throughout the university. I have used my accomplishments at the Academy to gain admission to other programs including the Center for Bilingual and Multicultural studies in Cuernacava, Mexico, Forester International Institute in San Jose, Costa Rica, and Vanderbilt University for the Summer Experience.

TALH has truly been the turning point in my life, as I learned from the college admissions process. I have always wanted to attend a selective university in the Northeast and I thought that good grades and extensive extracurricular involvement would be enough. Speaking with administrators at several selective universities, I learned that this is no longer enough to be accepted. After offers of admission from several East coast schools, I began to think about what set me apart from more than 70% of applicants with above a 700 SAT in both the math and verbal sections, the 50% of valedictorians, and the thousands of class presidents who were rejected.

After speaking with admissions committee members, I found that about 90% of the people who apply to these selective universities are qualified and could do well if offered the opportunity for admission. Unfortunately, space is limited and the universities must select a limited number of applicants. While sorting through the mounds of applications from qualified students, these admissions officers look for distinguishing characteristics among the applicants. They must find students who have done something unusual, something that sets them apart from the rest of the class presidents, valedictorians, and those with high SAT scores.

I feel that the Texas Academy of Leadership in the Humanities is what did this for me. Few students are both qualified and willing to step out of their comfort zones and attempt college two years early, but those who do, gain an edge over those who do not. I do not mean to imply that the Academy will get people into selective universities, but those who attend the Academy and do well do have an edge over those who do not.

In *The Future of Capitalism* (1996), Lester Thurow writes how our society is rapidly changing, propelled by several key forces. One of these forces is the internationalization of our economy with those of other nations. Our generation will not only be competing with people graduating from the best schools in the United States, but also with those qualified individuals from other countries.

For anyone to hope to succeed in our ever more competitive economy, they will need to be the best at whatever they choose to do. As our borders become less defined and professionals from other nations began to move into our job markets, those who are not the best in their field will face lower wages, assuming they are able to find a job at all. United States high schools are far behind many of those in the world's leading industrialized countries, and the Texas Academy of Leadership in the Humanities is an excellent first step in helping Texas high school students successfully compete with their international counterparts.

### References

Thurow, L. C., (1996). *The future of capitalism: How today's economic forces shape tomorrow's world*. New York: W. Morrow and Co.

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(PACE from pg. 11)

Mr. Craigen asked each Fort Bend ISD principal to select two parents to represent their school in the development of a district-wide gifted parent support organization. From those names, he contacted 10 parents from different school to form a steering committee which would conduct the background work necessary to lay the foundation for an organization. The committee was chaired by Mrs. Elam.

The first goal was to write a constitution and by-laws. Following that, meetings covered other organizational work. Names for the support group were discussed, as was the date, time and place for the first general meeting. A speaker was contracted and a structure for dues was discussed.

To gather names of parents interested in holding officer positions, an officer interest form was sent to all parents of gifted and talented students, as well as a cover letter from Mr. Craigen announcing the date of the first general meeting.

Officer interest forms were replied to very quickly. It was apparent that there was a great deal of interest in an advocacy group. More than 100 forms were received, the majority volunteering to do committee work. About 15 respondents said they were interested in holding office. The steering

committee contacted these people and then slated a board of officers based on experience, qualifications and representation of different schools across the district. The steering committee voted unanimously to incorporate under the name Parents for Academic Excellence and to use the acronym PACE. The agenda was planned for the first general meeting and final revisions were made in the constitution, by-laws, and dues structure.

Approximately 300 parents attended the first PACE general meeting. After some discussion, the assembly voted unanimously to accept the by-laws, dues structure and elect the proposed slate of officers. The speaker, Irving Sato, spoke on "The Non-Negotiables of Gifted Education."

PACE continues to work for the very best for the Fort Bend ISD's children by supporting the administration's positive steps toward academic excellence and gifted education. The only way parent groups such as PACE can be formed and be effective is through hard work. No one is going to hand gifted children what they need without parental involvement.

(Excerpted with permission from *PACE Newsletter, Issue One, 1990. Fort Bend, Texas*)

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